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Imperial Trends in Global International Society

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Abstract. *Although multipolar, Global International Society has unipolar (imperial) trends too. Even if it is dominated by several stakeholders, current international system is a strong “state system”. Yet only a small number of states have structural power being able to influence the nature of international system. Multidimensional system of power determines hierarchy and balance of power in Global International Society. International agendas are interdependent – military, economic and environmental agendas provide the premises to promote unipolar trends.*

Keywords: *Global International Society, international system, unipolar, imperial, international agenda*

After the fall of the Berlin Wall that put an end to bipolarism in international relations, current international society has been characterised by a turmoil that James Rosenau called an “uncertain and tense situation”¹. As compared to the New European Renaissance, specialists in international relations have noticed a change of configuration on both reality and perception levels, as well as in magnitude and depth. Dynamics characterising international society of the century has shown anarchy and order, globalisation and fragmentation, globalisation and heterogeneity, complexity and interdependence.

Even specialists in international relations have been surprised by the evolution of international reality particularly since our mentality has remained to the perceptions resulting from the fractures in international society during the Cold War (fracture East – West, centre – periphery, North – South). As Susane Strange², one of the most reputed specialists in contemporary international relations, noticed human mentality still has imprints of the idea that the analysis of international relations is achieved from the perspective of transnational empire. Yet, there is no apparent change or multiplication of international stakeholders. Transnational societies and financial flows are not yet prevented by either territory or border. They have been perceived as superpowers being able to stabilise or destabilise great regions worldwide. In conclusion, we can notice that the typology of relations – whether cooperation or conflict – are ceaselessly changing. Consequently, cascade changes are no longer perceived as fragmentations of international relations, but as continuity data³. For instance, the enlargement of the EU to Central and Eastern Europe has been based on the logic of continuity thus representing the disappearance of the fracture between East and West⁴.

Hence the natural question if in the Global International Society there might still be unipolar (imperial) trends. In this paper, we aim at showing that it is possible and even necessary. We have two categories of arguments. On the one hand, we will

¹ James Roseanu, *Thinking Theory Thoroughly*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1999, p. 50.

² Susane Strange, „Toward a Theory of Transnational Empire”, in E.O. Czempiel&Rosenau James, *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges. Approaches to Worlds Politic for the 1990's*, Lexinhon Books, Lexington, 1989

³ James Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics. A theory of Change and Continuity*, London, 1990.

⁴ Esther Barbe, *Relaciones Internacionales*, 2nd edition, Madrid, 2003., p.275.

attempt at seizing the possibility of a unipolar logic through the features of contemporary international system. On the other hand, we will seek to see this element through the specific agendas that global international society supports.

Before getting to the core of the topic, it is important to make a brief introduction of the features of unipolar (imperial) international system. In this case, only one power settles the *agenda*, dictates the norms and controls all resources of the power. Hegemonic power brings together its power of coercion – much superior to other units of the system – by imposing their own system of values⁵. Here, one can speak of a hegemonic system considering that domination relationships are built vertically.

The stability of the system enters a crisis at a time when clerk logic is altered; horizontal relationships between the units of the system are degraded, as their own power is eroded from within (internal fights, destruction of resources) and because there is a change of system due to the penetration of external elements. All these elements lead to the changing nature of power⁶.

As a consequence of the USA ascendancy, several authors consider that we are facing a new unipolar logic. Robert Gilpin considers that after 1945, the United States of America have acquired the status of “hegemonic power⁷”. Raymond Aron calls the USA an “imperial republic” with reference from representatives of the left American school of international relations, that is, George Liska and Harry Magdoff⁸, as well as the analysis of the American diplomacy in 1945-1972⁹.

1. Global International System has unipolar (imperial) features

A. Although dominated by several stakeholders, the current international system is a strong “state system”. The decreasing number of stakeholders making up the structure of the system and the hierarchy issues resulting from it is highly important as they own the structural force to settle the rules of the game on a global level in international system¹⁰. The use of the notion of international system instead of state system can be explained by the fact that the definition of structure considers the logic of powers without neglecting transnational aspects involved in the control of force derived from the great powers¹¹.

A complex analysis of unipolar trend in international society after 1991 is carried out by Strobe Talbot in the chapter suggestively entitled *The Unipolar Decades* in the book on *The Great Experiment. The Story of Ancient Empires, Modern States*,

⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedia politicii de forță. Realismul ofensiv și lupta pentru putere*, București, Antet, 2001, pp. 28-31

⁶ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, *Soft Power. The Means to success in world politics*, New York, Public Affairs, 2004, pp. 1-32

⁷ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge, University Press, 1981.

⁸ George Liska, *Imperial America. The International Politics of Primacy*, Baltimore, 1967; Hermann Magdoff, *The age of imperialism. The economics of US Foreign Policy*, New York, 1969.

⁹ Raymond Aron, *Republique imperial. Les etats unis dans le monde 1945-1972*, Calman Levy, Paris, 1973.

¹⁰ Robert Cooper, *Destrămarea națiunilor. Ordine și haos în secolul al XXI-lea*, București, Univers Enciclopedic, 2007. Pp. 68-81

¹¹ J.J. Mearsheimer, *op.cit.*, pp.257-265

and the *Quest for a Global Nation*¹². At the beginning of 1991, from the conclusion of one of the most influent intellectuals focused on American Foreign Policy, Charles Krauthammer, when speaking in an article entitled *The Unipolar Moment* of the United States as “the unchallenged superpower would be the centre of world power, the principal maker and enforcer of rules for everyone else, and the metropole of a modern (or perhaps postmodern) global empire”¹³, presents the dynamics of unipolar trends¹⁴ towards a *New world order*. Strobe Talbot considers that although George Bush did not conclude a *Pax Americana* in 1991 after the war in Kuwait, the *Pax Universalis* that put an end to the event built responsibilities and aspirations for the United States¹⁵ to be validated by the wars in Yugoslavia¹⁶. The position of the United States at the Rio de Janeiro conference in June 1992 and the refusal to sign the treaty to preserve forest biodiversity is a sign of unipolar position. The change in NATO’s strategy after 1994, the ever more active involvement of the United States in actions meant to solve certain interethnic conflicts (Rwanda, Haiti, former Yugoslavia) are considered unipolar trends as well¹⁷. The good American offices to solve decades old conflicts (Northern Ireland, Near East) bring to the foreground the responsibility of unipolar power for the security of certain regions in the world. War against terrorism triggered after 9/11 is an expression of ambivalence – aspiration/responsibility – characterising the unipolar trend of the United States¹⁸. The more and more responsible involvement of the United States in the measures for non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, in limiting climate changes, in limiting the effects of pandemics striking wide areas¹⁹ shows not only the diversification of unipolar responsibilities, but also the aspiration to build a world order centred on the American model.

B. Only great powers have structural power. According to Susan Strange, structural power involves control on security, manufacturing, finances and knowledge – science, technology, and culture²⁰. *Historical* analyses carried out on growing and fading powers show that the most important is the *hard* side of power, that is, control on security and manufacturing²¹. John Ikenberry considers that imperial order putting an end to the “balance of power” stands for a “post realist order of liberal

¹² Strobe Talbot, *The Great Experiment. The Story of Ancient Empires, modern states, and the quest for a global nation*, Simon & Schuster, New York, London, Toronto. Sydney, 2008, pp. 255-391

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 258-259

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p.259. Several authors have developed the Krauthammer’s theme, exhorting Americans to accept country’s imperial responsibilities to spread liberal values and the rest of the world to accept the United States in the role (Nigel Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, New York , Basic Books, 2003; Nigel Ferguson, *Colossus: The price of America’s Empire*, New York, Penguin, 2004; Deepak Lal, *In Defence of Empires*, Whashington DC: AEI Press, 2004; Max Boot, “The Case of American Empire”, in *Weekly Standard*, October 15, 2001),

¹⁵ S. Talbot, *op.cit.*, p. 269

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 276-279.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 294-298

¹⁸ *Ibidem* , pp. 351-369

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 393-401

²⁰ Susane Strange, *States and Markets: An introduction to International Political Economy*, Printer, London, 1988.

²¹ Paul Kennedy, *Naissance et declin des grandes puissances*, Paris, Payot, 1991;

hegemony”²². Current global analyses show that the *soft* aspect of power, that is, communication and finances, is highly important for the time being²³. At the end of the Cold War, there is a return to historical pessimism laying stress on security control as a central analysis factor²⁴. This has been even more obvious after 9/11.

C. Multidimensional character of force. Considering that in the past decades there have been many stakeholders in international system with attributes of a structural power, we may say that currently the force of international system has a multidimensional character. This idea has been shown by several authors. Susan Strange points out that not only states can fulfil the role of a structural power, as even criminal associations such as mafia can do it²⁵. Robert Gilpin considers that there is a convergence between state power and its transnational enterprises²⁶.

D. Hierarchy and balance between great powers are two fundamental structural elements ordering international anarchy (*Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power* – Kenneth N. Waltz)²⁷ and turning it from mere chaotic plurality into a state system²⁸. The two elements provide a relative order leading to a better understanding and a predictability of international system processes²⁹.

2. Current international agendas favour unipolar (imperial) trends

The concept of *agenda* designates a group of issues at the basis of organising political activity. This concept is extremely useful as it orders explanations and connects them with events that occur. For instance, armed conflicts – one of the classic topics of the military agenda – are nowadays inseparable from the phenomenon of economic globalisation – criminal economy developed as mining exploitation, weapons or narcotics trafficking – to individual action characterising global agenda – humanitarian assistance or mercenary groups.

Most specialists in international relations consider that the world is highly complex now. This change has been more explicit in 1990-1991 after the dismembering of the USSR and the Gulf war (1991)³⁰. Yet the complexity of current international society has found its origins in changes taking place in the world in the 1970s (economic revival of Europe and Japan, as well as transnational actors coming to the foreground) and the 1980s (alteration of economic processes derived after globalization and the appearance of the environmental issue). These changes have

²² G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 270-274;

²³ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to lead. The changing nature of American Power*, New York, 1991.

²⁴ John Mearsheimer, “Back to the future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War” in *International Security*, vol. 15, nr.1, 1990, pp. 5-56.

²⁵ S. Strange, *op.cit.*, p. 123.

²⁶ Robert Galpin, *US Power and the Multinational Corporation*, New York, 1975.

²⁷ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Teoria Politicii Internaționale*, ed. 1, Iași, Polirom, 2006 pp. 147-180;

²⁸ Idem, “Structural realism after the Cold War”, in Kenneth N. Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, New York, London, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008, pp. 185-189;

²⁹ E. Barbe, *op. cit.*, pp. 211-212.

³⁰ Kenneth N. Waltz, “America’s European Policy viewed in Global Perspective”, in Kenneth N. Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, New York, London, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008, pp. 310-334

become variables influencing the bipolar relations between the USA and the USSR³¹. The disappearance of this bipolarity has led to important changes on the international agenda, particularly in the military field and then in other fields, such as the economic, global and environmental fields.

Inevitably, such evolution has risen several questions. The most important is the one on who owns structural power in the world or, in other words, who settles international agenda and who designates working norms of international society. After the end of the Cold War, military agenda does not seem to be the only one undergoing radical changes. In order to analyse other changes, it is important to achieve a complex analysis of the military agenda.

2.1. Military agenda

A. The central issue of military agenda is security. The end of the Cold War has tried to achieve a substitution of the concept on national security lying at the basis of defence of own national territory with military tools with the concept of global security. The new conception on security shows that military dimension is devoid of value. What has been predicted during the 1987 United Nations Conference for disarmament and development has happened. Security does not only derive from military aspects, but also from economic, social, humanitarian and ecological aspects. Increasing security can set the stage for increasing disarmament. At the same time, it may set the stage for sustainable development³².

Multidimensional and global character of security is the product of a thinking that has to be understood as it did not appear at the end of the Cold War. The end of the Cold War would reconfigure the terms of security.

First of all, theoreticians and politicians will try to revalue new dimensions of security focusing their studies on adjacent phenomena³³, such as migration, integrism or natural catastrophes; these last features are the core of another agenda, the *global agenda*. Consequently, topics such as peace, democracy, environment and development have begun to be considered core topics on the military agenda.

Secondly, as periphery security can no longer be explained through notions such as decolonisation or bipolarity, it becomes incomplete and is associated with topics apparently parallel with it.

Beginning with observations referring to the new vision on security, we can establish a first direct correlation between the end of the Cold War (decreasing militarism and responses of the defence) and the new dimensions of security (sustainable development). Under the circumstances, the discourse on defence of peace has appeared. The end of the Cold War has not put an end to hegemonic wars or conflicts at the periphery of international system. On the contrary, the Gulf war triggered in 1991 developed within the concept of geostrategic security and the cult of limiting weapons worldwide. Ten years later, after 9/11 and the beginning of the war against terrorism, there is a revival of national security to preserve hegemonic power in the military field.

³¹ Martin Wight, *Politica de putere*, București, Ed. Arc, 1998, pp. 62-68

³² E. Barbe, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

³³ R. Cooper, *Destrămarea națiunilor...*, pp. 92-108

The world is divided into two fields when considering violence. Considering Mary Kaldor's work on *New Wars. Organised Violence in a Global Era*, we may see that when passing from bipolar international society to global international society, actions involving violence are getting stronger.

First of all, the end of bipolarity at the end of the Cold War has been a framework favouring the appearance of an area dominated by chaos, by unsafe or grey zones. These spaces have resulted from the evolution of modern state towards decentralisation, the disappearance of violence monopole and the disintegration of states by settling structures on ethnic criteria. For example, the erosion of the state in Africa has made many authors speak of *failed states*³⁴. These *failed states* are not only on the African continent. There are some in Europe, where the EU Member States have given away some of their sovereignty to Brussels. There are two types of state failure: the African one overwhelmed with violence (Sub-Saharan Africa) and the European one in the context of integration as states are involved in a process of conscientious and peaceful dissolution. The disappearance of the USSR and Yugoslavia, both federal states, has left room to a great conflict space at the end of the war.

Secondly, globalisation has influenced new wars. The impact of globalisation has been obvious in the case of war actors – foreign soldiers, voluntary expatriates, United Nations officers, peacekeeping troops – and economic factors – illegal weapon, drugs, valuables or human trade. The impact of globalisation has led to changing previously settled international regulations; they no longer protect civilians and involve them in conflicts – paramilitary or mafia groups.

Thirdly, globalisation has led to the establishment of “grey zones” that have become very important in the evolution of international relations. These grey zones have preserved violence in the conflict area and are based on illegal trafficking and terrorist movements. Areas neighbouring potential conflicting areas, such as former Yugoslavia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Andin America and Africa³⁵, are strictly supervised through preventive diplomacy, peace keeping and stabilising peace.

B. The phenomenon of military agenda buy-out. Changing the features of wars, the appearance of parallel systems of protection and defence of multinational societies or mafia groups belong to personal security in the 21st century. It will no longer have a public dimension acquiring a private dimension too. Globalisation has led to a phenomenon of “war buy-out” through connections between complex global financial flows and strategy concerning actions of terrorist organisations. According to Thierry de Montbrial, “Bin Laden is not a reaction of the traditional Islam, but an aberrant avatar of globalisation through both tools of its efficiency (technique, competence, organisation) and disconnection of action by genuine societies”³⁶.

2.2. Economic agenda compels us to remember that the end of the Cold War is identified with the victory of the capitalist system. Fukuyama explained it through the so-called “end of history”³⁷. The planetary existence of the capitalist system, or the so-called process of globalisation, has not been achieved due to the fall of the Berlin Wall, which was a physical impediment, or the psychological barrier imposed by the existence of alternatives or other possible worlds.

³⁴ R. Cooper, *The Postmodern State and the World Order*, London, 2000.

³⁵ Ph. Moreau Defarges, “La gestion des zones grises”, Ramses 2003, Paris, 2002, p. 69.

³⁶ T. de Montbrial, “Perspectives”, in Ramses, op.cit., p. 23 apud E. Barbe, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

³⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *Sfârșitul Istoriei sau ultimul om*, București, 1997.

A. The economic agenda defines the fundamental reason of our era: globalisation. The phenomenon of globalisation has been explained through several features: the increasing number of interactions and interdependences, the appearance of a feeling of globalising perception, the adoption of liberalising policies breaking down all barriers, etc. From the point of view of current international society – a society based on interstate logic – it has been noticed that globalisation suppresses the notions of action marks of international stakeholders, that is, territory and time. Naturally, globalisation has influenced states as they become structures anchored in the philosophy of territorial sovereignty. The suppression of sovereignty has also caused the phenomenon of time compression. An example in point is the suppression of EU internal borders control followed by the compression of time for circulation of goods, persons, capitals and services.

At the same time, technological revolution in the field of informatics leading to an unprecedented compression of time has deep consequences on economic life. Through electronic operations in the financial field, electronic trade on the internet, videoconferences in enterprise management, a new economic reality is being built – virtual economy.

B. Globalisation and fragmentation of the world live together in current international society³⁸. In the context of tensions between democracy and totalitarianism, most authors consider that globalisation and fragmentation have been more obvious after the end of the Cold War³⁹. Actually, these globalisation/fragmentation tensions appeared long before 1989. A first aspect of the phenomenon is worldwide expansion of values and technology providing incentives for the will for individualisation translated into the defence of own identity. In certain cases, there have been bursts of self-determinism, such as the cases of the USSR and Yugoslavia. These globalisation/fragmentation tensions have also occurred in the context of regional economic integration processes. It has been shown by the multiplied regional commercial agreements. For instance, in 1948-1949, seven regional commercial agreements were signed, while 38 agreements were signed in 1990-1994⁴⁰.

All over the planet, regionalism has been present from the European economic and monetary integration to the North American free trade area and similar processes in South America and Africa. However, there is another reality, too – regionalisation of world trade is focused in the triangle represented by Western Europe, North America and Eastern Asia, which excludes most of the planet. In other words, trade between these regional blocks and within them is over ¾ of world trade.

This world unbalance makes that most of the population throughout the world is excluded from benefits of globalisation, which causes a deep division and consequently a fervent dispute. Thus, we can say that globalisation is a universal process expressed in an irregular manner.

C. The issue of power in a globalised economy world. The international economic system resulting particularly after 1990 has supported the hegemonic role of the United States. Hegemonic stability provided by this superpower involves a certain

³⁸ Kenneth N. Waltz, "Globalization and Gouvernance", Kenneth N. Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, New York, London, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008, pp. 230-244

³⁹ Ian Clark, *Globalisation and fragmentation. International Relations in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, 1998

⁴⁰ E.Barbe, *op.cit.*, p. 285.

organisation of market and certain strategic-diplomatic conditions needed for the survival of other states. Nowadays, there are voices considering that irrespective of the power currently dominating the world, the economic field cancels political power⁴¹.

The articulation of political power and economic globalisation raises less the topic of world economic powers' responsibility. Curiously, the responsibility of some global governing bodies, such as the IMF, OECD, G8 and OMC, is contested by broad social movements. They are blamed for worldwide economic unbalances⁴².

D. The process of globalisation coincides with identity resurrection. The topic of identities is a central phenomenon of global international society. Thus, we witness a paradox: globalisation assumes the disappearance of two fundamental references – time and space, while identity is superposed on a territory with all its symbols and claims the defence of its cultural values originating in its own history. In simple terms, the global character of technology is opposed to the particular character of culture. Although English is the internet language of communication, it will have to coexist with other 3000 languages.

We can say that the era of globalisation is converted into the era of identities. The management of globalisation-fragmentation/identity is one of the greatest challenges of the future international society.

Trying to draw a conclusion on the main aspects of global agenda, we can mention the following ideas: there still is a classic polarisation of state system; multilateralism proves to be necessary as a governing solution of global agenda; regionalism has led to structuring the triade international economic system. The existence of two worlds – a world of peace and a world of chaos – responds to a different economic and political reality.

2.3. Environmental agenda

As of the 1970s, there has arisen the idea that different spaces making up the natural environment of human species are threatened by pollution ignoring borders that is susceptible to be preserved without international cooperation. Some of them (extra-atmospheric space, bottoms of the sea) are proclaimed “*common patrimony of humanity*”. On the level of civic awareness, there is a perception of the need for defending environment.

The situation of environment is alarming at least from four points of view: climate changes, limitation of biodiversity, land clearings, degrading soil.

A. Climate changes are developing at an alarming pace. Global temperature has risen by almost a degree in the past century. Satellites show that ozone in Antarctica atmosphere has diminished by 10%. Because of industrial activity, CO₂ accumulations in the atmosphere have reached in the latter half of the 20th century levels equivalent to accumulations over almost half a million years. According to the resolution of the *Toronto Conference on the Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security* (1988), humankind is making an involuntary, uncontrolled and generalised global experiment with consequences resembling a nuclear war⁴³.

B. Dangers on biodiversity can be found in genes, individuals, species and ecosystems. The pace of species emergence reached an alarming rate in the 20th

⁴¹ Peter Hirst, George Thompson, *Globalization in question. The International Economy and the possibilities of Governance*, Oxford University Press, 1996.

⁴² E. Barbe, *op.cit.*, pp. 286-287.

⁴³ *Ibidem.*, p. 318.

century: three species a year. First it is the result of overexploitation of those species with commercial value, then the result of destroying their habitat.

C. Land clearing process is alarming and turns soil into desert. Yet the most alarming aspect is woods quality diminishing at a galloping pace in the latter half of the century.

D. Degrading soil is strictly connected to the land clearing process rendering it difficult for agriculture and supporting certain ecosystems. Soil degrading is caused by developing urbanisation and commercial exploitation of soil, particularly by irrigations thus leading to salinity of soil.

Africa and Asia are the most affected continents by soil degrading with consequences on food crisis in the area. As well, climate changes contribute to a genuine regional ecological disaster.

Besides these short-term issues, we have to remind ocean pollution, diminishing fishing stock, sweet water management, toxic chemicals and waste storage, including the radioactive ones.

Thus, cooperation in the environmental field develops on bilateral, regional and universal levels. There is no autonomous international organisation specifically in charge with environmental protection. Within their competence, each specialised institution can have concerns in the field or adopt regulating measures.

Environmental agenda in the past decade as seen through the Kyoto Protocol to limit CO₂ emissions and particularly the failure of the Copenhagen Conference (2009) on climate change has certain unipolar trends. CO₂ pollution is a topic defining imperial policies as well as their consequences – climate changes. There are premises to witness a change of paradigm in Global International Society after the current economic crisis by passing from defining imperial power depending on the criterion of military and economic agenda to defining it according to environmental agenda.

In conclusion, the Global International Society has several unipolar trends although with a multipolar aspect. Even if it is dominated by several stakeholders, the current international system is still a strong “state system”⁴⁴ where only a small number of states have structural power and are able to influence the nature of international system. Multidimensional system of force determines hierarchy and balance of power in Global International Society. International agendas in tight interdependence – military, economic and environmental agendas – settle sufficient premises to promote unipolar trends.

⁴⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York, Basic Books, 1997, p. 10-24

